

God and the American Writer by Alfred Kazin

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God and the American Writer concerns how some dozen major American writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries grapple with ultimate concerns. Most of them find themselves at a remove from institutional faiths, and they face their ultimate concerns either in the inwardness of sensibility or in developing a critique of social life. But however detached they are from religions, they are not detached from religion. They cannot say, in the words of Edmund Wilson's crabby demand of the author during summer conversations on Cape Cod, that "we must simply live without religion." For all of them in different and idiosyncratic ways bring to tales of human affairs a religious imagination, an imagination that, in Kazin's richly suggestive terms, "inquires into the infinity of our relationships." And the idiosyncratic religious imaginations of these authors are all of them reflections of and reflections upon the special situation of religion in American culture.

When Alexis de Tocqueville compared the role of religion in Jacksonian America to its role in France, he was surprised to discover that representatives of the very religious institutions which most opposed democratic politics in France believed in the United States that democracy and religion sustain each other. Disestablishment gave the heterogeneous religious communities in the United States freedom from state repression by a dominant confession, and that gave those communities in turn an investment in democracy. But the mutual support of democracy and religion Tocqueville found went beyond this merely practical consideration. Because it required different faiths to work out a *modus operandi*

with each other, the religious freedom secured by disestablishment was a school for political freedom generally. In return, disestablishment gave vitality to the religious life, freeing it from that staleness which seems to be an inevitable feature of state religion.

State religions, because they are instruments of state power, are subject to all of the resentments and mixed feelings the people may have about state power. Even in purely religious concerns state religion cannot avoid having about it an air of coercion, and coercion is as deadly to faith as it is to love. In giving up the devil's bargain of state religion, American religions gained both cultural prestige and spiritual vitality. Disestablishment ironically turned out also to enable free religions to play political roles that state religions cannot play so well. For one thing, Tocqueville argued, American religions help shape the mores necessary to sustain a democratic culture. Also, the institutional structures of disestablished religions provide some of the most important of the voluntary associations in which citizens learn those arts of dealing with each other and organizing common enterprises that are so crucial to democratic political life.

Where Tocqueville found in France that anticlericalism and hostility to religion were versions of the same thing, he found in America that anticlericalism was not only not antireligious but was in a foundational way religious, since anticlericalism both arose from and supported the respect for inward freedom upon which faith depends. Anticlericalism, this is to say, turned out to be a way of insisting upon the prophethood of all believers, and its provenance is as much in the radical Reformation as in the Enlightenment. What Tocqueville describes would seem to be limited to Protestant circles, but it has had profound effects on every religious tradition in the United States. Not least is the whiff of antinomianism that surrounds the personal religious lives of many Americans even from religious traditions far removed from the theologies of the Reformation, and the arminianism and perfectionism that are endemic in the practical faith of laymen even in those churches ostensibly most theologically committed to Calvinism. This shared inward turn underlies

Harold Bloom's remark that serious lay Americans have more religiously in common with each other than they do with their own co-religionists in other countries.

Flannery O'Connor once observed that even American atheists are still saturated with the spiritual urgencies of Christianity and Judaism; her saint of the wrong religion, Hazel Motes of *Wise Blood*, may preach the word of the "Church without Christ," but he still has the hunger for God in his voice, and he still carries Jesus around in his head like a stinger. The greatest deniers in Kazin's book, Melville and Hawthorne, are still God-intoxicated men, and his heroes, Dickinson, Lincoln, Frost, and Faulkner, while never believers in any strict sense of that word, are ethically alive to the world's urgent and impossible moral complexities, which they are neither stymied by nor master of, and they see in the light of eternity a world both mystical and mystifying. "It is true that the unknown," Emily Dickinson said in a letter Kazin quotes repeatedly as a touchstone, "is the largest need of intellect, although for this no one thinks to thank God."

To center religious life upon the inward freedom of this unknown is not precisely the same thing as to deprive the spirit of every resource but its own privacy, but this difference has sometimes been lost in practice, as religion in America has become less the institutional center of a shared and complete vision of life and more a purely inward and private seat of religious feelings and ethical precepts. As religion moves inward, it may dim down into a generic piety, since in a purely inward religion religious feelings are just feelings and religious imperatives are just habits. Better than nine out of ten Americans report themselves to be believers, and all too many are this kind of believer. (But why complain about this? True, one might do better; but one is likely to do worse.) Or if religion retains its vitality as it moves inward, it may come to look like a species of compulsive behavior, a hysterical irrationality of a merely psychological or merely political kind whose contagion one either seeks to spread or resist. In our day, as in Charles Chauncy's, the problem is not that religious upheavals are really only disguised forms of psychological crisis but that

in a purely inward religion these two very different things become harder to disentangle.

One of the ironies of the reduction of religion to the private world is that in polite society the urgent and compelling manifestations of religion are increasingly hedged about with the kind of prohibitions that used to be reserved for obscenities, perhaps because the private world, the sphere of intimacy, is a world that demands to be kept in the shade. (Few at Harvard Law School will tell you that the requirements of faculty diversity make it imperative that they hire more Pentecostals and Fundamentalists. And it isn't only because they think of such people as zealous forcers of conscience that modern academia has made them unwelcome. That kind of zeal, in my neck of the woods at least, is thought of not merely as dogmatic heteronomy but as a kind of demonic possession.) At the same time sexual things, arising from the same dark, intimate world, and perhaps inheriting that terror and numinosity that belonged to the divine before we dimmed it down, have increasingly taken on a kind of sacredness. Perhaps that is why so many of the religious contradictions of our culture, in Hawthorne's day as much as in our own, play themselves out in proxy wars over sexual issues.

Most of the authors Kazin examines were not deeply tied to any institutional faith, although Emerson and Whitman thought of themselves as finders of new directions in religion, and Eliot persuaded himself that he could identify his way into an Anglo-Catholic traditionalism he at least partly made up. But even the most iconoclastic of these authors, the most removed from the conventional piety they seek to transform, to reject, or merely to shock, is in a predicament not that far removed from the predicament of the most ordinary American lay believer, who also has always had to improvise a faith out of his or her own resources. All of these authors are crucially religious; none of them are, or can be, religious in the way Dante or Milton are religious, because Dante and Milton did not have to invent their faith from the ground up. Dante and Milton could grow up in their religion the way one grows up in a native language; growing up in that way puts at one's

disposal a rich but never fully articulated, never fully conscious repertory of religious ways of being. If the American writers—even Eliot—cannot grow into a religion in this way, and never can rely in half-consciously upon a religious world that is bigger and older than they are and exists without them, they nevertheless are able to see all faith with the freshness of those to whom the questions of faith do not already have pat answers, and they live in the exhilaration of quests that just may disastrously fail.

An inward religion is a do-it-yourself religion. That is why all of the authors have had to patch together as best they can their own jerry-built ways of articulating how they stand in the face of ultimate concerns. As none of these authors can be religious as Dante is religious, none can be secular in the way Jane Austen is, who like her characters led an exemplary if conventional religious life that rarely troubles the surface of their consciousness. All of the American writers Kazin discusses must find their own way (or embrace some traditional way with a crank ostentation that betrays the idiosyncrasy of the choice). All of them, left on their own, must, in Flannery O'Connor's phrase, work out their practical heresies in a dramatic form.

Of all of these authors Kazin echoes what Hawthorne said of Melville in 1856 after having a long conversation with him on a desolate Lancashire seashore during the latter's desperate pilgrimage to the Holy Land after the shipwreck of his career and mental health:

Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had “pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated.” But he does not rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest unless he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists—and has persisted ever since I knew him and probably long before—in wandering to and fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sandhills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe or be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous

not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us.

Kazin opens with a brief precis of American religious writing during the colonial era. Little of what he says would be new to readers of Perry Miller or to students of the American Enlightenment. But the strength of the book is not in bringing to light new material through literary-historical research, but in assessing its meaning by playing it upon the mature and considered sensibility of a deep and experienced reader like Kazin. What strikes Kazin in his brief reflections upon Edwards' *Personal Narrative* is the intense and lyrical personalism of his relationship with the divine, a relationship in which he is always naked and at risk and as liable to be thrown down as Melville is.

Even Jefferson, for all the temperateness and marmoreal cold of his language, inherits some of this personalism. In proposing to disestablish the Anglican Church in Virginia, he argues

that Almighty God hath created the mind free, and manifested his supreme will that free it shall remain by making it altogether insusceptible of restraint; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments, or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, who being lord of both body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either.

Kazin's Hawthorne is sharply critical of the sternness of seventeenth century Puritan culture, and in his critique Hawthorne shares the agenda that Lawrence Buell described in many other Unitarians of his generation. But the Puritan sense of sin is no antique curiosity, for sexual betrayal, guilt, revenge, self-loathing, ambivalence, all of the entangled interiors of the heart that Hawthorne explores, are the matter of a dark inward scrutiny

at least as skeptical of human nature as Calvin's, even if the idiom is the idiom of sexual vampirism rather than the idiom of original sin. If Hawthorne inherits a Puritan sense of the innate wrongheadedness and wrongness of the human, he never stands at the ready with the Puritan's remedy for that problem, for Hawthorne never offers grace to those who have learned the hard way the knowledge of good and evil; he only offers more knowledge, chiefly the knowledge of how little that knowledge will suffice to set one aright again. I was surprised to see that Kazin takes seriously the apparently redemptive confrontation between Dimmesdale and Hester in the forest late in *The Scarlet Letter*, in which they reaffirm their love for each other and make plans to flee to Europe; it is pretty clear, despite the swelling background music of that scene (with its chapter entitled "A Flood of Sunshine" and its description of Hester releasing her rich, glossy hair from its tightly bound confines, an early use of what Hollywood would turn into a cliché), that Hester and Dimmesdale are fooling themselves. Why else follow this scene with a description of the newly liberated Dimmesdale barely being able to restrain himself from whispering salacious suggestions into the ear of a young woman of his parish who admires him with a passion which only she does not know is less than purely spiritual? The Puritans themselves, who are more than willing by this time to let Hester off the hook, and who are mystified by Dimmesdale's final confession, are far less stern than Hawthorne is, since they at least imagine a human nature that is capable of redemption.

Hawthorne was an apologist for the Democratic party, and supported the various unsavory measures it adopted to forestall the breaking out of civil war over slavery. Kazin rightly ridicules his fatuous defense of his patron and college friend, the hugely inept Franklin Pierce (although Kazin seems to have forgotten that it was Polk, not Pierce, who appointed Hawthorne to the Salem Custom House). But it is probably simply a mistake to say that Hawthorne had a blind spot for the evil of slavery. Hawthorne knew pretty well what that wrong was, and how intractable deep-seated such wrongs are. The moral

world of America's best novelists about racism and slavery, William Faulkner and Toni Morrison, is a world whose geography is pure Hawthorne. If Hawthorne's defense of Pierce, both in his 1852 biography and in his 1862 "Chiefly About War Matters," is evasive to the point of bad faith, it is not because he did not know what the matter was; it's because he was too despairing to face it head on.

Kazin's Melville is not the manic overreacher of *Moby-Dick*, so like the novel's own Ahab for all of Melville's criticism of him, but the chastened, embittered, skeptical Melville of his neglected epic *Clarel*. In the journal of his 1856 travels in the Holy Land from which Melville drew while he was writing *Clarel* almost twenty years later Melville sees the barren landscape of nineteenth century Palestine as devastated by the God's terrifying love, as longed-for as it is destructive. Kazin rightly puts Melville in the company of Kierkegaard and the nameless poet of the book of Job. *Clarel*, never widely available (Melville sold most of the first edition—printed at his family's expense—for scrap paper), and only recently reprinted in paperback, is one of the great religious poems in English, bringing for all of its crudities and prosiness a searing religious intelligence to its subject that no other nineteenth-century poet can match. Melville's portrayal of the fate of political idealism in the career of the failed 1848 revolutionary Mortmain is driven by a keen insight into the ways in which high callings come unglued; the critique of religious modernity and liberal capitalism offered by the Confederate veteran Ungar (who is also part Native American and part Recusant, and who at the period of the poem is serving as a mercenary in Egypt) is as telling and perceptive as any critique of the same subjects made by Theodor Adorno or the modern followers of Nietzsche. Kazin does the modern reader a great service in recovering this side of Melville.

Kazin is far less sympathetic, and a bit less persuasive, when he reads the ebullient projectors of the American newness, Emerson and Whitman. Emerson and Thoreau were renegade Unitarians only partly capable of being reclaimed by that faith when it sought to

follow their path from an Enlightenment to a Romantic ethos. Whitman retained some of the habits of thought and speech, and some of the spiritual problematics, of the Quaker faith he had in most outward ways left behind, although his religious concerns, were intensely personal and idiosyncratic. Whitman and Emerson, who sought to revolutionize religion for everyone, wound up instead the pet seers of small circles of enthusiasts, but the living religious force of their work poetry is still far from spent.

All three seem to be little more than fervid egotists in *God and the American Writer* and all are implicated in the dissolution of religious awe into a warm bath of narcissism and beautiful sentiments. But it is not quite fair to say that Emerson reduces the Godhead to the mere sentiment of the divine: whatever made Emerson glad to the brink of fear as he walked among snow puddles on that bare common on the winter afternoon he describes in *Nature* was not a mere sentiment, although the sentiments are the place where that thing was registered. Nor is the self upon which the author of "Self-Reliance" relies just Ralph Waldo Emerson, who lived in a white house in Concord, raised curious kinds of apple, and wrote striking sentences: it is an inward thing never fully known to us, something always in the act of restless becoming and overcoming, something whose story is never over, something never exhausted by its attributes. The biographical and sociological self is a windrow left behind by that tide. Whitman is handled rather less roughly by the book, for Whitman's everpresent "I" is always in wait of a loving other, with whom he seeks to create a world adequate to the spirit, a world in which poetry does not look at God so much as at the things among which it lives, things which it sees illuminated by a divine light. It is this tenderness for the particular which Kazin most admires in Whitman, about whom "Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and joy and knowledge that pass all the art and argument of the earth," a joy and knowledge that promises all persons a place, but does not neglect even "mossy scabs of the worm fence, and heaped stones, and elder and mullein and pokeweed."

If Hawthorne's support of Pierce seems morally obtuse, Emerson and Thoreau's support of John Brown seems the man of thought's misplaced admiration for the man of action, no matter what the action. Kazin sometimes under-rates the political commitment of his authors, however. Even if he did complain that the Civil War "got horribly in my way," Thoreau's active opposition to slavery, for instance, predates the Fugitive Slave Act (it was over the Mexican War, after all, that he spent his night in jail), and Whitman was far from indifferent to slavery, as "A Boston Ballad" and his fierce anti-Pierce tract "The Eighteenth Presidency!" bear witness. But Kazin does see Jefferson all the way around, as many readers now do not, and he brings out the subtleties of such writers as Olmsted, Garrison, and George Templeton Strong. He also does full justice to the redemptive Christianity of Harriet Beecher Stowe, neither ridiculing her as was fashionable thirty years ago, nor seeing her as a contemporary figure as some do now.

Twain's lifelong nose-thumbing at the hidebound religious conventions of his elders shows him never quite freeing himself from their limitations, and his view of the human being as a pure mechanism subject only to forces seems nowadays to be neither very original nor very deep, however well it may have fluttered the petticoats of the officious widows and deacons of his youth. Kazin pairs Twain's visit to the Holy Land in *The Innocents Abroad* with Melville's in *Clarel*, a juxtaposition that more than anything shows how out of his depth Twain is in religious matters; what are occasions for a spooky and dark insight into the desert places of the spirit for Melville seem to give Twain no more than material for a grumpy monologue, and where even Melville's most dogmatic fellow pilgrim, the evangelist who calls himself Nehemiah, at least has the courage of his stubbornness, Twain's pious companions are querulous Babbitts whose poor horsemanship Twain describes at amused length. What counts for Kazin as the most deeply religious moments in Twain are the lyrical river moments that so draw readers to *Huckleberry Finn*. But his would-be moments of transgressive genius, such as *The Mysterious Stranger* seem

in retrospect the products of an extended imaginative adolescence.

By contrast William James, building as sympathetic a case for religion as he can imagine, and, because of his own intense spiritual needs seeing it with an acuity and depth far greater than the ostentatiously scientific Freud can bring to bear, nevertheless can think of faith only as a particularly powerful kind of psychological resource. Kazin notes that James' insight into religious crises of faith is the insight of a quester, not the insight of a detached psychologist, and argues that some of the appeal of Jamesian pragmatism is that it offers a respectably modern way to discuss the things of the spirit. At the same time, he notes that James' language and his sensibility leave both author and reader just outside of the threshold of real belief. He can see the attraction of belief, and longs perhaps to share it. But he cannot cross into belief, because he can see belief only as a powerful state of consciousness, not as a vision of the world.

Eliot professes to have crossed the threshold at which James balked. But in Kazin's view he never quite leaves off the overinsistence of the anxious *poseur*: there is still in Eliot's claim to be a "monarchist in politics, classicist in literature, Anglo-Catholic in religion" something of a "that will show *you*" quality. Eliot's Anglicanism is a private invention deeply disguised in public forms: Kazin shrewdly points out how little Eliot's traditionalism in fact is informed by the tradition he adopted with such desperate earnestness. The inheritors of truly living traditions by definition cannot be traditionalists. Little as Kazin is attracted to Eliot's religion, in which the Church is everything and even the Father and Son are nothing, the Eliot he remembers is not the Eliot of *The Waste Land* but the anxious, puzzled, self-doubting, longing Eliot whose plangency so humanizes *Four Quartets*. The God who is worshiped in *Four Quartets* offers little in the way of redemption or even comfort, but the worshiper who speaks is among the most human speakers in twentieth century poetry.

The four heroes of the book belong neither to the party of hope nor to the party of

despair but to the party of irony. Kazin was among the only serious critics in Frost's life never to underestimate him or to be taken in by his own propaganda. He finds in Frost's poetry a stoical grimness like Hardy's, but unmoderated even by Hardy's compassion, although sometimes shunted off by the poetic equivalent of whistling in the dark. Kazin admires Frost's understated way of suggesting depths of loneliness and desperation, especially in the lives of characters he draws with a few firm strokes. But Frost, unlike Jeffers, never is driven to adopting stoicism or toughness as a pose. In his best poems, the narratives and dramatic monologues of *North of Boston*, his second book, the tone is earned by the poems' entire subordination to the characters they depict. He "leaves the heartlessness of things as he sees them," Kazin explains. And that is a kind of courage. Kazin's Faulkner shares with Frost the ability not to be unhinged by appalling things. But the key to Faulkner, for Kazin, is not only the unflinching extremity of his God-blasted characters—Joe Christmas, Popeye, Thomas Sutpen—or even the moral clarity of nightmares of slavery and racism—Christmas castrated by the robotic Percy Grimm—but the odd and unaccountable moments of redemptive human tenderness. Kazin gives pride of place to generous souls like Lena Grove of *Light in August* and Dilsey of *The Sound and the Fury*, characters whose humanity is all the more crucial for being so unexpected, so totally at odds with the prevailing logic of the world.

The visionary heroine of *God and the American Writer* is Emily Dickinson. Without any institutional ties to speak of, and indeed with an intense skepticism about most traditional religious concepts—she refers to the Bible as an antique volume written by faded men, and ridicules her father for addressing an Eclipse whom he calls His Father every morning—her poetry is nevertheless charged with an anguished, naked, mystical confrontation with the divine. Perhaps more akin to what Shelley called the Spirit of Solitude than to the God her neighbors worshiped, Dickinson's God announces his presence with the shudder of horror and wonder she feels at a certain slant of light on winter afternoons, a slant of

light that brings her “Heavenly Hurt” and leaves no scar except an “internal difference, where the Meanings are.” This lonely, difficult, transforming power has, like the God of Job, splendor and awfulness, but neither the God nor the poet have much concern for the ethical aspects of faith; although fascinated with the question of suffering, which it endlessly worries, Dickinson’s religion is simply not drawn to moral issues. But it is the most intense religious poetry in the American canon, and it does, as Kazin remarks, “tell us what despair within may signify more than pain and why religious *thinking* survives even when ‘Father’ is not exactly where He used to be in the childhood of the world.” Dickinson invented a religion of one, but her readers nevertheless can partake in it to the extent that an insistent loneliness is something in which most people have a kind of secret share

Kazin gives pride of place to Lincoln, who early in his life was a freethinker, and who seems to have learned his faith from the moral cruxes and suffering of the Civil War. Although no temporizer, like Hawthorne, he was also reluctant to imagine that God’s purposes were his own, that God’s wishes are his own wishes enunciated in a much louder voice. When a delegation of ministers arrived at the White House to tell the President that God Himself had directed them to carry their message demanding immediate emancipation to him, Lincoln replied, “Don’t you think, gentlemen, He might have spoken first to *me*?” If it is the special vice of good people to imagine themselves as wielding the sword of God, it is the special vice of the perceptive to use their insight into the moral complexity of all acts as an excuse for inaction. It is Lincoln’s special greatness that he knew the kinds of thing that put other minds into impasses and yet retained the ability to act, even in the face of moral risk. Another side of that same greatness is his consistent rejection of the self-righteousness that turns virtues into vanities. Nowhere does this show up better than in the Second Inaugural, in which a prophetic darkness, which declares the bloodshed of the Civil War to be due to North and South alike for their mutual complicity in slavery and wonders whether the fighting will only stop when every drop of blood drawn by the

lash will be matched by another drawn by the sword, calls out and is answered by a moral generosity which calls for the enemies to love each other again in a mutual recognition of their own moral brokenness. It's not for nothing that Kazin gives the Second Inaugural Address pride of place among American religious writings. Perhaps second only to that speech, is that other great speech given by Martin Luther King on the steps of Lincoln's Memorial.